THE SIEGE OF OMICRON-9
MATTHEW SPENCE

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By

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Commander Silas Thorne stared at the main telemetry holotank.

The display was mostly empty space, save for the jagged rendering of the asteroid they had hollowed out and three clean, vector lines slicing through the orbital plane. Those lines represented the kinetic projectiles that had shattered their primary communications array twenty minutes ago.

"Sensor telemetry is still fragmented, Commander," Lieutenant Robert Vance said, his fingers fly-typing across a hardened physical interface. "The array was vaporized. We are relying entirely on the low-gain laser transceivers mounted on the ventral ridge."

"Origin point for the kinetics?" Thorne asked. His voice was flat, hollowed out by adrenaline and three shifts without sleep.

"Nowhere," Robert replied, shaking his head. "We tracked the back-trajectories. They originated from the empty sector outside the Lagrange point L4."

Thorne leaned over the console, his mag-boots anchoring him to the deck. Hard science fiction was a reality of physics; there were no shields, no artificial gravity fields, and no faster-than-light sensors to save them. If something was shooting at them, it obeyed the laws of thermodynamics.

"Scan for infrared bloom," Thorne ordered. "If they launched kinetics at that velocity, the recoil energy alone would have cooked their cooling jackets. Look for waste heat."

"Picking up a thermal signature now," the sensor tech shouted. "Angle zero-four-zero, declination negative twelve. We have a blackbody temperature spike."

The holotank updated. A blinking red icon appeared at the edge of the sensor grid.

"They’re burning toward us," Robert said, his face paling under the harsh fluorescent lighting. "Deceleration burn detected. High-efficiency ion engines, but the exhaust velocity is impossible. The fusion plume is emitting a spectrum we’ve never logged. Heavy isotope markers. Not human."

The base rattled again, a deeper, structural groan this time.

"Report from the surface!" Thorne snapped into his comm-link.

"This is Sergeant Miller at Battery Alpha!" The audio was thick with static. "We’ve got incoming sub-munitions! Not kinetics this time. They're dropping high-density cluster payloads. They aren't

trying to blow the base apart, Commander. They’re peeling back our armor plating. They want to get inside."

Thorne looked back at the holotank. The alien vessel was matching their orbital velocity with terrifying precision. On the screen, the trajectory line broke into a dozen smaller threads—landing craft, entering ballistic trajectories toward the asteroid’s blind spots.

"General alarm," Thorne said, detaching his sidearm from its magnetic holster. "Seal the bulkheads. Depressurize the non-essential sectors to prevent explosive decompression when they breach. Get the marines into their vacuum suits and lock down the main gantry."

He looked at the small red dot drawing closer on the screen.

"God help us," Robert whispered as the primary power grid flickered and died, plunging the command deck into the blood-red glow of emergency batteries. "They're on the hull."

Chapter 2: Thermal Bloom

The emergency klaxons skipped the traditional air-horn blare. Instead, they pulsed a low, physical thrum directly into the soles of Silas Thorne’s mag-boots—a frequency chosen because it could bypass a vacuum-suit helmet.

"Decompression warning in Sector Four!" Robert Vance shouted over the ambient din of the command center. His hands blurred across the mechanical backup keys as the primary glass panels went dark. "The outer gantry just lost pressure. Structural sensors are registering multiple local kinetic punctures. Not missiles, Commander. They're drilling."

"Vent Sector Four manually," Thorne commanded, adjusting the seal on his neck ring. He twisted his helmet into place, locking it with a sharp, pneumatic hiss. The ambient hum of the command deck died instantly, replaced by the internal, rhythmic rush of his own oxygen recycler. "Don't give them a gaseous shockwave to ride into the core. If they want the base, make them fight the vacuum for it."

He tapped his suit's comm-link, switching to the primary tactical net. "Miller, report. What is your status at Breach Point Bravo?"

The response was an erratic mess of static and hard radiation spikes, a consequence of the unshielded alien fusion plume ionizing the local space.

"We are—*krzzzt*—deployed along the secondary bulkhead!" Sergeant Miller’s voice cut through the interference, breathless and tight. "The automated pressure doors held, but they’re utilizing localized plasma-arc cutting heads. Thermite derivative, maybe? It’s eating through twelve-centimeter tungsten-reinforced plating like ice. They aren't using explosives because they want our environmental control systems intact. Sir, we are down to mechanical sights. Laser designators are scattering in the venting gas!"

Thorne looked back at the main tank, which was now flickering on a secondary silver-zinc battery loop. Robert had isolated the telemetry from the ventral laser transceivers, filtering the raw data through a clean Fourier transform to strip out the sensor noise.

"Commander," Robert said, his voice coming through the suit-to-suit short-range radio. "Look at the engine spectrum from the landing craft. I isolated the Doppler shift from their deceleration burn."

Thorne leaned over Robert’s shoulder, looking at the raw cryptographic breakdown. "That's not just a heavy isotope marker."

"No, sir," Robert muttered, a tremor evident in his telemetry logs. "The exhaust frequency is modulated. It’s an active, high-bandwidth carrier wave embedded directly inside the ion exhaust stream. They aren't just burning their engines to slow down; they’re using the kinetic energy of their own propellant to flood our local sensor arrays with a specific, repeating algorithm. It’s a data insertion attack."

"Are they trying to breach our firewall?"

"Worse. They're using our own low-gain transceivers against us. The algorithm is flooding our automated point-defense grid with false-positive radar returns. It’s making our railguns calculate phantom trajectories. The guns are firing at empty space."

Before Thorne could respond, a violent shudder ripped through the asteroid's core. The floor plates buckled upward by three centimeters. The magnetic lock on Thorne's boots disengaged for a fraction of a second, lifting him into a brief, terrifying weightlessness before his emergency tethers snapped tight.

"Breach!" Miller roared over the tactical net, accompanied by the distinct, high-frequency *thwip-thwip-thwip* of coilguns firing in hard vacuum. "Breach at Bravo! They're inside! Visually, they are—"

The audio cut to a flat, carrier tone.

On the master diagnostic board, the status light for Sector Four flipped from amber to an absolute, unblinking black.

Chapter 3: Blind Fire

The carrier tone from Sergeant Miller’s line rang in Silas Thorne’s ears like tinnitus. On the bulkhead monitor, the biological telemetry for Squad Alpha didn't drop to zero—it simply ceased to report, the data lines severed at the junction box inside Sector Four.

"Vance, drop the digital counter-measures," Thorne commanded, his voice tight inside his helmet. "We don't have the processing power to fight a software war while they're cutting our throats

physically. Isolate the main computer core from the external transceivers. Sever the physical fiber lines if you have to."

"If I cut the transceivers, we lose the point-defense grid entirely," Robert Vance replied, his hand hovering over a mechanical emergency cutoff lever behind a pane of yellow safety glass. "The railguns will go dead-stick."

"They're already dead-stick! They're shooting at ghosts," Thorne snapped, stepping toward the auxiliary tactical console. "We are going to manual fire. If we can't trust the radar tracking, we'll use the oldest targeting metric in the system: ballistic trigonometry."

Thorne slammed his palms onto the manual override panel, punching in his command authorization code. With a heavy clunk of pneumatic relays, control of the base's twin 50-millimeter surface railguns transferred from the automated targeting computer to the local joystick mounts on his console.

"Robert, I need a hard vector," Thorne said, his eyes scanning the low-resolution optical cameras mounted on the asteroid's exterior hull. The lenses were pitted by micrometeorites and clouded by the venting gas of Sector Four, but through the haze, the faint, violet luminescence of the alien ion dropships was visible. "Give me a lead angle based on their last known deceleration curve. No sensors. Just math."

Robert’s fingers hammered across his mechanical keyboard. Without the main computer, he was calculating orbital interception vectors using a legacy flight-navigation template. "Targeting dropship bravo-two. Range: twelve kilometers. Velocity: three hundred meters per second relative. Adjust your pitch to positive eight degrees, azimuth two-seven-four. Fire on my mark."

Thorne gripped the heavy mechanical joystick. The weapon had no recoil in the traditional sense, but the magnetic field expansion of a railgun launch would shake the entire structural spine of Outpost 9-Omicron.

"Three... two... one... Mark!" Robert yelled.

Thorne squeezed the physical trigger.

A blinding arc of white light flashed on the exterior camera as the railgun capacitors dumped two hundred megawatts of stored electrical energy into the launch rails. The hyper-velocity tungsten slug left the barrel at Mach 25, slicing through the vacuum without a sound.

On the monitor, the violet plume of the alien dropship suddenly bloomed into an expanding cloud of white-hot magnesium fire. The unguided slug had struck the vessel's primary propellant tank. Deprived of magnetic containment, the superheated ion plasma expanded instantly, tearing the dropship into jagged fragments of composite alloy that drifted away into the dark.

"Direct hit," Robert breathed, a brief flash of triumph cutting through his panic.

But the victory was short-lived.

A sharp, metallic *thud* echoed through the deck plates beneath their feet. It wasn't the distant vibration of a railgun blast or a kinetic strike from orbit. It was a rhythmic, rhythmic tapping from the *inside* of the command deck's emergency pressure door.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Then, the high-tensile steel of the security door began to glow a bright, cherry red.

Chapter 4: The Core Purge

The cherry-red circle on the command deck's emergency pressure door expanded with terrifying speed. Molten slag dripped from the seal, bubbling and turning instantly to gray ash as it hit the cold deck plates.

"The cutting head they're using... it’s a high-density fluorine-plasma torch," Robert Vance said, his voice dropping an octave as he watched the steel liquefy. "At this rate, structural failure of the bulkhead will occur in ninety seconds. Then we lose atmospheric pressure in here."

"Let it vent," Silas Thorne said, his voice deadly calm. He unlatched a heavy mechanical locker against the back wall and pulled out two Mag-Pulser rifles—recoilless projectile weapons designed specifically for close-quarters firefights inside a vacuum. He tossed one to Robert. "We're already in our suits. Secure yourself to a structural pillar. If the room decompresses when they break through, the rushing air will blow them right back into the corridor."

Robert caught the weapon with shaking hands, but he didn't hook himself to a pillar. Instead, he lunged back toward the main data console.

"Commander, if they take this room, they get the encryption keys for the entire Jovian defense network," Robert said, his fingers flying across the auxiliary mechanical inputs. "Outpost 9-Omicron is a relay station. Our quantum-encrypted data drives contain the orbital vectors for the entire strategic deterrent fleet. I have to initiate a hard purge."

"Do it fast," Thorne said, raising his rifle and aiming it dead center at the glowing, melting circle on the door. He wrapped his left arm tightly around a structural support beam, his mag-boots locked to the deck at maximum power.

"The automated system is locked out because of the sensor flood," Robert muttered, sweat blurring his vision inside his helmet. "I have to manually cycle the liquid nitrogen coolant lines. I'm going to freeze the flash-memory arrays. If the temperature drops to absolute zero rapidly enough, the crystalline structures inside the drives will fracture. The data will be unrecoverable."

CLANG.

A heavy section of the steel door buckled inward. A thin hiss of escaping air screamed through the suit radios as the atmosphere of the command deck began to bleed into the corridor beyond. The pressure gauge on the wall began to spin backward.

"Coolant cycle initiated!" Robert shouted. "Forty seconds to total drive destruction!"

Through the widening gap in the melting door, Thorne caught his first glimpse of the attackers. They didn't look like the chitinous monstrosities of old science fiction. They were clad in matte-black, non-reflective vacuum armor that seemed to absorb the emergency red lighting of the base. Their movements were mechanical, fluid, and perfectly synchronized. They didn't carry kinetic rifles; they wielded compact, magnetic particle accelerators.

The atmosphere in the room finally tore the door completely off its hinges. A violent torrent of rushing air slammed into the intruders, throwing the first two black-armored figures off balance in the low-gravity corridor.

"Fire!" Thorne roared.

He squeezed the trigger. The Mag-Pulser slammed a burst of high-density tungsten darts across the threshold. Without a gaseous medium to slow them down, the darts shredded the lead attacker's chest plate, venting a spray of frozen, iridescent fluid into the vacuum.

From behind the fallen alien, a second figure raised a particle rifle, the barrel glowing with a fierce, cerulean light.

"Data purge at ninety percent!" Robert yelled from the console, just as a beam of coherent energy sliced through the air, melting the top half of his terminal into a puddle of bubbling plastic.

Chapter 5: Rear-Guard

The cerulean particle beam didn't just melt Robert’s terminal; the thermal back-splash exploded outward in a cloud of superheated composite fragments. Robert was thrown backward, his suit's chest plate scarred by molten plastic. He slammed into the bulkheads, his Mag-Pulser rifle spinning away into the vacuum of the room.

"Data purge... complete," Robert gasped over the short-range comms, his biometric monitor flashing a warning for a fractured clavicle and a slow pressure leak in his left sleeve.

"Hold your seal!" Silas Thorne yelled, moving to intercept the doorway. He fired another three-round burst from his Mag-Pulser. The tungsten darts caught a third black-armored intruder in the shoulder, spinning the entity around in the zero-gravity environment, but two more took its place. Their particle rifles tracked toward Thorne's position.

Then, the corridor behind the alien boarding party erupted in a flash of silent, violent light.

A cloud of high-velocity magnesium fragments tore through the rear of the alien formation. The intruders were caught in a brutal crossfire as three figures in dented, ash-stained human vacuum suits kicked their way out of a ceiling maintenance hatch.

"Eat kinetic, you bastards!" Sergeant Miller’s voice boomed over the tactical net.

Miller and the two surviving marines from Squad Alpha didn't use rifles; they were wielding heavy, industrial magnetic rivet-guns modified for close-range breaching. At a distance of three meters, the heavy steel bolts tore through the aliens' matte-black armor with terrifying kinetic force.

The alien formation broke. Caught between Thorne’s defensive position and Miller’s surprise flanking maneuver, the remaining intruders inside the corridor were systematically neutralized, their bodies drifting limply in the unpressurized hallway.

Miller bounced off the doorframe, using his mag-boots to arrest his momentum inside the ruined command deck. His faceplate was smeared with soot on the inside, his breathing heavy. "Reported dead prematurely, Commander. We used the manual emergency overrides to drop into the coolant maintenance shafts before they finished cutting through Sector Four."

"Good to see you, Sergeant," Thorne said, lowering his weapon and immediately moving to Robert's side. He pulled a roll of high-tensile sealant tape from his tactical belt and slapped it over the puncture in Robert’s sleeve. The suit's internal pressure stabilized. "Vance managed to purge the data core. They didn't get the fleet coordinates."

"They got something else, sir," Miller said, his tone dropping. He gestured out into the corridor toward the dead attackers. "We searched one of their dropped gear-packs on the way up. They weren't trying to download our files from the core. Their software attack was a decoy to mask a physical hardware override."

Robert groaned, leaning against the bulkheads as Thorne helped him stand. "What did they override, Sergeant?"

"The automated reactor maintenance overrides," Miller said. "They bypassed the physical dead-man switches on the fusion core. They didn't come to steal our data, Commander. They came to turn Outpost 9-Omicron into a thermonuclear bomb, and the countdown is already hard-coded into the magnetic containment coils."

Chapter 6: The Descent

The master diagnostic board on Thorne’s wrist terminal flickered with a single, unblinking metric: *Fusion Core Temperature: 1.4 × 10^8 Kelvin*. The magnetic containment field was narrowing, compressing the superheated deuterium-tritium plasma into an unstable, hyper-dense point.

"The containment coils are cycling every forty seconds," Robert gasped, his voice weakening as his suit's automated medical system pumped localized analgesics into his fractured shoulder. "The alien code didn't just override the safety valves. It locked out the primary control bus. You can't shut it down from here. You have to physically vent the magnetic chokes."

"Miller, with me," Silas Thorne commanded, checking the gas pressure on his Mag-Pulser rifle. "Robert, stay here and monitor the magnetic degradation. If that core pressure hits the supercritical threshold, you tell us, understood?"

"Understood, Commander. Just... don't look directly at the plasma if the shielding cracks."

Thorne and Miller dropped down the vertical access shaft of Sector Zero, using the emergency ladder rungs to guide their weightless descent. Without atmospheric pressure, the base was a tomb of absolute silence, save for the vibrations traveling through the structural metal. As they neared the reactor level, the deck plates began to vibrate violently—a low-frequency oscillation caused by the destabilizing magnetic fields fighting the kinetic pressure of the plasma.

They reached the reactor deck to find the primary maintenance bay illuminated by an eerie, cerulean luminescence. It wasn't an alien light; it was Cherenkov radiation bleeding through the microscopic fissures forming in the reactor's heavy water cooling jacket.

Floating in the center of the bay was the primary containment housing—a massive, toroidal ring of superconducting magnets wrapped in layers of dense lead-boron shielding.

And waiting on the gantry were three more black-armored figures. They weren't cutting wires or downloading data. They were actively welding the manual emergency release levers shut.

"They're securing the perimeter," Miller hissed over the short-range comms, bringing his modified rivet-gun to bear. "They want to make sure we can't abort the detonation."

"Take the left flank," Thorne ordered, unhooking his tether. "No missing, Sergeant. If a stray projectile hits that cooling jacket, we won't need the countdown to blow us to atoms."

Thorne launched himself off the ladder ring, drifting horizontally through the zero-gravity maintenance bay. The lead alien spotted the movement, its particle rifle tracking toward him with fluid, robotic precision. Thorne fired mid-drift, the recoilless Mag-Pulser spitting a three-round burst of tungsten darts. The projectiles pierced the alien's visored faceplate, killing its forward momentum and sending the corpse spinning backward into the dark.

To his right, Miller’s rivet-gun roared over the tactical net, a heavy steel bolt pinning the second alien’s torso directly to the structural gantry. The third attacker fired a desperate, wild beam of coherent blue light that sliced cleanly through Thorne’s left mag-boot, severing the boot's electronics and scorching his suit's outer insulation layers.

Thorne fired an automated two-round burst into the alien's chest. The entity collapsed over the reactor console, its black blood freezing into perfect, dark spheres that floated into the path of the cooling beams.

Thorne slammed against the reactor housing, his damaged boot sparking uselessly. "Miller! The manual override lever! It's half-welded!"

Chapter 7: Absolute Zero

Back in the ruined command deck, Robert Vance stared at the rapidly deteriorating telemetry. His left arm was completely dead, immobilized by the suit's automated medical cuff, and the seal over his punctured sleeve was beginning to fray under the extreme pressure differential of the vacuum.

"Commander," Robert choked out, his vision blurring at the edges as hypoxia began to set in. "The containment coils are at ninety-two percent density. You have less than four minutes before the magnetic field collapses into an irreversible runaway reaction."

"The manual lever is fused, Robert!" Thorne’s voice was strained, punctuated by the heavy, rhythmic thuds of Miller slamming a titanium crowbar against the alien weld-points.

"Then look at the secondary bypass," Robert said, his mind racing through the base's engineering schematics. "The liquid nitrogen lines. The same coolant loop I used to purge the data core. The main valve passes directly through the reactor's auxiliary cooling jacket before it reaches the computer bay. If you rupture that line, the liquid nitrogen will flash-freeze the superconducting electromagnets. It will drop their temperature below the critical point for superconductivity."

"If the magnets lose superconductivity, the field drops instantly," Thorne noted. "The plasma will dump directly into the internal ablation shields. It'll destroy the reactor, but it won't trigger a thermonuclear blast."

"Exactly," Robert said, coughing. A thin film of frozen moisture formed on the inside of his faceplate. "But the pressure release will vent through the lower engineering deck. Anyone down there will be caught in the kinetic back-blast."

Down in the core, Miller slammed the crowbar one final time, shattering the brittle alien alloy weld. The manual lever broke clean off in his hand.

"Lever's gone, Commander," Miller said quietly, looking at the stump of metal. He turned his head toward the heavy, insulated coolant pipe running overhead. "We do it Robert’s way. Get behind the primary shielding column, sir."

"Miller, negative, that line is pressurized at four hundred atmospheres," Thorne warned, attempting to pull himself toward the sergeant using his single functioning mag-boot.

"I've got a heavier suit than you do, boss," Miller said, overriding the commander's tactical link. He stepped up to the high-pressure nitrogen line, planting his boots firmly onto the gantry. He raised his modified rivet-gun, pressing the heavy muzzle directly against the reinforced conduit wall. "See you topside."

Miller pulled the trigger.

The heavy steel bolt punched straight through the insulated pipe. Instantly, a torrential scream of liquid nitrogen at minus-196 degrees Celsius erupted into the vacuum of the bay. The expanding, freezing gas didn't make a sound, but the sheer kinetic force of the decompression blasted Miller off the gantry like a leaf in a hurricane.

The liquid nitrogen sprayed across the toroidal housing. Within seconds, the brilliant cerulean glow of the reactor began to stutter. The superconducting coils, suddenly robbed of their precise thermal environment, went resistive. The magnetic field failed.

A blinding flash of pure, white thermal energy erupted inside the containment ring as the star-hot plasma dumped into the sacrificial carbon tiles of the ablation shield. The shockwave of the thermal expansion slammed into Thorne, throwing him into the bulkhead as the entire base groaned under the sudden dissipation of millions of joules of kinetic energy.

Chapter 8: The Pod Blockade

Thorne woke to the sound of his own heavy breathing. His visor was cracked, a thin spiderweb pattern fracturing his view of the reactor bay. The room was dark, save for the flickering orange glow of dying electrical fires.

"Miller," Thorne croaked, coughing as the suit's emergency scrubbers struggled with the sudden influx of carbon monoxide from his ruptured seal. "Miller, report."

A low groan answered him from across the bay. Miller was wedged between two structural support beams, his suit's outer layers completely coated in a thick, white crust of frozen nitrogen frost. "Still breathing, Commander. My suit’s heating elements are running at maximum capacity just to keep my core temperature above freezing... but the reactor is dead. We aren't going to vaporize."

"Robert," Thorne said, switching to the command frequency. "Robert, do you copy?"

"I'm here," Robert’s voice was faint, a whisper over the static. "The base power is entirely gone. Life support is operating on local suit reserves only. We have maybe twenty minutes of air left across the board. We need to get to the emergency escape pods in Sector Seven."

Thorne dragged himself across the room, hooking Miller’s arm over his shoulder. Using his functional right mag-boot and his hands, he pulled them both up the access shaft, bypassing the

dead lift systems. They crawled through the pitch-black, silent corridors of Outpost 9-Omicron, their path illuminated only by the narrow beams of their suit-mounted flashlights.

They reached the Sector Seven embarkation deck ten minutes later. Robert was already there, slumped against the manual release wheel of Escape Pod Alpha.

"We have a problem," Robert said, pointing through the thick reinforced quartz viewport of the launch bay.

Outside, in the stark glare of the distant sun, the remains of the alien dropship Thorne had destroyed with the railgun were drifting through the orbital path of the base. But it wasn't just debris. The primary alien command vessel—the two-hundred-thousand-ton leviathan—had shifted its position. It had moved into a close, synchronous orbit directly above the escape pod launch tubes.

Two smaller landing craft were hovering less than five hundred meters away, their high-intensity searchlights sweeping across the pod hatches.

"They're policing the launch vectors," Miller said, his teeth chattering from the lingering cold of the nitrogen blast. "The moment any of these pods clear the tubes, they'll pick them off with point-defense lasers. They aren't letting anyone leave this rock alive."

Thorne looked at the two remaining escape pods. They were unarmored, thin-skinned aluminum shells designed for emergency atmospheric entry or long-term cryogenic drift. Against even a low-yield alien particle weapon, they would be vaporized instantly.

"They're waiting for us to flush ourselves out," Thorne said, his eyes narrowing behind his cracked visor. "So we don't flush. We use the trash."

Chapter 9: The Kinetic Counter

"The mass-driver on the lower hangar deck," Thorne said, turning to Robert. "Is the manual track still functional?"

Robert blinked, his hypoxic brain struggling to process the command. "The cargo mass-driver? The one we use to launch mineral ore packets back toward the Jovian processing plants? Yes, sir. It’s entirely mechanical-ballistic. It doesn't rely on the primary data grid. It uses a series of high-capacity capacitors charged by the secondary solar arrays on the asteroid's dark side."

"How fast can it launch a standard cargo container?" Thorne asked.

"Standard mass is twenty metric tons," Robert muttered. "It launches them at roughly fifty kilometers per second to clear the asteroid's gravity well and enter the transit trajectory. Why?"

"We don't launch a cargo container," Thorne said. "We launch Escape Pod Alpha. The pod's external dimensions match the cargo rail tolerances. If we disable the pod’s internal transponders and tracking beacons, it looks like a block of unrefined iron ore on a standard radar array."

"And the alien ship?" Miller asked. "They're sitting right in the launch path."

"That's the point," Thorne said, a cold smile touching his lips. "At fifty kilometers per second, a twenty-ton object doesn't need an explosive warhead. It doesn't need a guidance system. It is a kinetic kill vehicle. If they stay in that synchronous orbit, they are sitting directly in the barrel of a multi-kilometer mass-driver."

Working in near-total darkness, Thorne and Miller manually dragged Robert into Escape Pod Alpha, securing him into the primary deceleration couch. The suit-to-suit tethers were locked down to prevent them from being liquefied by the extreme G-forces of a mass-driver launch.

Thorne climbed into the pilot's seat, bypassing the automated flight computer and linking his wrist terminal directly to the pod's manual thruster valves.

"Miller, get into the secondary couch," Thorne ordered.

"Commander," Miller said, pausing at the hatch. "The mass-driver’s manual release switch is on the exterior gantry. Someone has to stay behind to pull the physical breaker. The automated timers were fried when the main core went down."

Thorne looked at Miller, then down at his own ruined left mag-boot and his cracked visor. His own suit was leaking oxygen at a steady three percent per minute. He wouldn't survive a long-term drift in an escape pod anyway.

"Get in the couch, Sergeant," Thorne said flatly. "That's an order."

Miller stared at him through the soot-stained faceplate for a long second, then gave a crisp, silent salute in the vacuum. He climbed into the cabin and sealed the secondary hatch.

Thorne pulled himself out of the pod and drifted toward the manual control station on the hangar wall. The station was a heavy, cast-iron box containing a massive copper knife-switch—a piece of twentieth-century industrial engineering preserved for exactly this scenario.

Through the viewing port, Thorne watched the massive alien warship shift slightly, its dark, angular hull blotting out the stars. It was preparing to fire on the base's remaining structures to clean up any survivors.

Thorne gripped the cold copper handle of the knife-switch. His oxygen warning light began to flash a steady, blinding crimson inside his helmet. *Remaining Air: 60 Seconds.*

"This is Outpost 9-Omicron," Thorne whispered to the empty room. "Clear the tracks."

He slammed the switch down.

Chapter 10: Clear Space

The discharge of the cargo mass-driver didn't create a roar, but the sudden, massive electromagnetic pulse caused every piece of remaining metal inside the outpost to strike a single, ringing note.

The capacitors dumped their entire reserve into the magnetic rails running the length of the asteroid's hollow center. Inside the launch track, Escape Pod Alpha was accelerated from zero to fifty kilometers per second in a fraction of a heartbeat.

The G-force instantly knocked Robert and Miller unconscious inside their couches, their bodies pressed deep into the foam padding as the pod cleared the exit gates.

To the alien warship hovering above, the launch didn't look like an escape attempt. It registered only as a sudden, massive kinetic signature from a mineral track. Before the alien automated defense grid could even rotate its weapon mounts, the twenty-ton aluminum and steel pod tore clean through the center of the alien vessel's forward superstructure.

The sheer kinetic energy of the impact—calculated in gigajoules—caused the alien ship’s internal structural frames to instantly liquefy. The ship buckled inward, its bow collapsing into its stern as the momentum of the pod carried it straight through the vessel and out into the empty space beyond. A silent, brief explosion of purple ion fuel bloomed against the blackness, and then the mysterious attacker disintegrated into a cloud of harmless, tumbling debris.

On the surface of the asteroid, Silas Thorne sat back against the hangar wall. His flashlight beam was fading, spinning down to a dull amber glow.

Through the viewport, he watched the small, dark speck of Escape Pod Alpha continue its trajectory, completely clear of the blockade, sailing out into the vast, open space toward the safety of the Jovian fleet.

His helmet display gave one final, long vibration. *Air Supply: Zero.*

Thorne closed his eyes, his breathing slowing as the cold of the remote outpost finally began to seep through his suit. The hum of the base was gone. The attackers were gone. There was only the long, quiet dark of the belt, and the stars burning steady and silent in the distance.